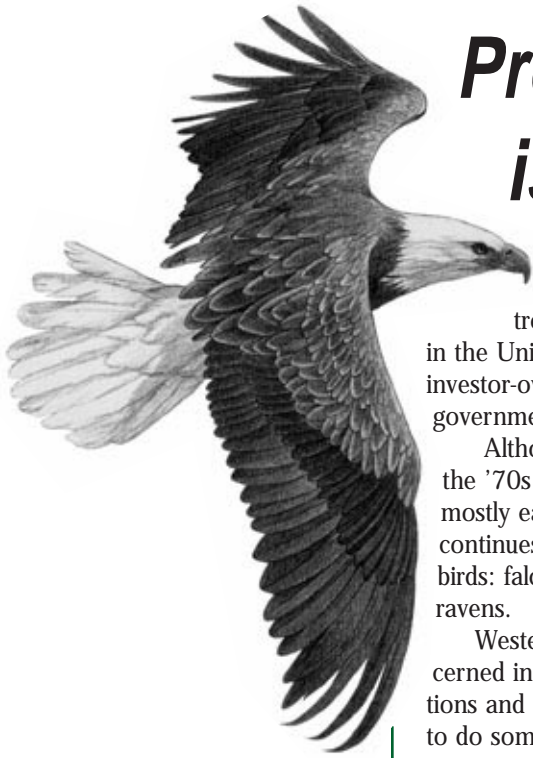


Preventing raptor electrocutions is group's goal



In 1989, before preventive equipment was properly installed, 12 raptors were electrocuted in Southwest Colorado alone.

Thousands of birds of prey, also known as raptors, have been electrocuted on power lines and structures in the United States. These lines belong to investor-owned utilities, public utilities and government agencies, including Western.

Although strides have been made since the '70s to reduce the number of raptors—mostly eagles—being killed, the problem continues, particularly as it affects other birds: falcons, owls, hawks, vultures and even ravens.

Western, along with a coalition of concerned individuals, environmental organizations and Federal and state agencies, is trying to do something about it. They are now in the process of creating a one-hour educational video that will be disseminated to electric utilities, resource management agencies and the public.

John Bridges, a Western environmental specialist and terrestrial biologist, serves on the video-sponsoring group. In addition to consultants and electric utilities, the group includes the North American Falconers Association, the Audubon Society, the Rural Utilities Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The video is intended to educate various audiences about protecting raptors on power lines, with segments on appreciation of birds of prey, regulations that protect the birds, power structure location/design and possible solutions. The film will include some of the positive aspects of raptor/power line interactions, such as nest sites and hunting perches.

"This is a major problem and Western doesn't want our customers getting into trouble over it," said Bridges. "My job is to keep our agency in compliance and our administrator out of jail—literally and figuratively."

Although the problem was identified initially more than two decades ago—and was for a time thought to be solved—in more recent years older, electrocution-proof equipment nationwide has gradually been replaced with equipment that doesn't meet requirements, Bridges said. Now, many birds, includ-

ing many smaller than eagles, are alighting on "hot" lines and grounding equipment—primarily distribution lines, substations and pole-mounted transformers—which are not properly spaced, causing the creatures to die instantly.

Although birds are still infrequently killed in or on Western's equipment, raptor electrocution is not the problem it once was, Bridges said. "Western doesn't have many raptor electrocutions," he said, pointing out that in 1997 only three animals, including birds, were found to have died in this manner. However, in 1989, before preventive equipment was properly installed, 12 raptors were electrocuted in Southwestern Colorado alone.

"We fixed the line and found that four years later, only one bird had died," Bridges said. "It's a real easy fix for anyone, but they have to know the problem is there."

Among those who are aware of raptor electrocution problems are electric utilities such as Public Service Co. of Colorado, Pacific Gas and Electric Co., Arizona Public Service Co. and most rural electric cooperatives.

The job of protecting these birds belongs to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has established strict regulations—primarily to support the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Eagle Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act—regarding installation and maintenance of equipment that reduces the likelihood of raptor electrocutions. "There's no way to completely eliminate such deaths," Bridges noted.

Penalties for first-time non-compliance with Fish and Wildlife regulations range from relatively "small" fines of \$5,000 to \$10,000 and/or a six-month jail term. If nothing is done after the first warning, fines can be increased from \$250,000 to \$500,000 and a jail term levied of up to two years.

"Fish and Wildlife doesn't want to be hard-nosed but something has to be done about this problem," said Bridges